



Talking About Freebies: Voter Narratives from Delhi

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Abstract

The expanding role of government-provided freebies in Indian electoral politics has triggered considerable public discourse, frequently examined through normative or fiscal lenses. However, remarkably little scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how voters themselves comprehend and assess such welfare benefits. This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate voter narratives surrounding freebies in Delhi, drawing on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with voters representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The study explores how citizens interpret freebies in relation to their everyday lived experiences, conceptions of state responsibility, and electoral decision-making processes. The findings challenge conventional assumptions about voter behavior. Rather than perceiving freebies merely as electoral inducements, participants understood them as everyday support mechanisms, legitimate entitlements of citizenship, and subjects of household-level deliberation. While freebies prominently feature in electoral discussions, they rarely function as decisive determinants of voting behavior. Simultaneously, policy-oriented dissent among voters highlights genuine concerns regarding long-term development priorities and capacity building. By foregrounding voter voices, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of welfare politics and democratic participation in contemporary urban India.

Keywords: Freebies, voter perceptions, qualitative research, welfare politics, Delhi elections, electoral behavior, citizenship, populism, urban governance, social policy

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the discourse surrounding freebies has emerged as a defining characteristic of electoral politics across India. Political parties increasingly incorporate promises of free or subsidized goods and services ranging from electricity and water to public transport, education, and healthcare facilities as central components of their electoral platforms ¹. These promises have ignited intense debates across multiple domains: academia, policy circles, media outlets, and even the judiciary. Typically, these discussions are framed around concerns of fiscal sustainability, populism, or moral hazard. Yet despite the fervor of these debates, the voices of voters themselves the primary recipients and evaluators of such policies remain conspicuously underexplored.

Academic discussions on freebies predominantly approach the issue from a top-down perspective, concentrating on state capacity, budgetary constraints, or the strategic calculations of political elites ². While these analyses

¹Devi, S. A. (2024). A case study on freebies and electoral politics in India: Voter behavior, economic impact, and global lessons. *PRAJNANA*, 53(2), 178-195.

² Bansal, S. (2025). Populism or empowerment: Welfare politics in Indian electoral democracy. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 8(1), 234-251.

offer important insights, they frequently rest on the assumption that voters respond to freebies in predictable or purely instrumental ways, such as exchanging votes for material benefits³. Such assumptions risk oversimplifying the complexity of voter behavior and overlooking the intricate social and moral frameworks through which citizens interpret and evaluate state action. What remains inadequately examined is how ordinary citizens actually make sense of these welfare provisions in their daily lives.

This research seeks to redirect analytical attention from political elites and institutions toward voters themselves. It addresses a seemingly straightforward yet significantly underexplored question: How do voters talk about freebies? By examining everyday conversations, lived experiences, and interpretive frameworks, this investigation aims to understand what freebies actually mean to voters beyond the reductive language of electoral manipulation or welfare economics.

Delhi presents a particularly compelling context for such an inquiry. As India's national capital territory, Delhi combines high urbanization, dense population, significant socio-economic diversity, and an active welfare-oriented policy environment⁴. The city has witnessed sustained political debates around subsidies and public services, making it an ideal site for investigating how urban citizens negotiate the relationship between welfare provision and democratic participation. Studying voter narratives in this context offers deeper insights into how citizens understand the intersection of material support, state responsibility, and political choice in contemporary India.

2. Review of Literature

The scholarly literature examining freebies and welfare provision within electoral politics can be organized into three broad intellectual strands: normative critiques of populism, political economy analysis of welfare policies, and empirical studies of voter behavior.

2.1 Normative Critiques of Populism

The first strand comprises normative critiques that frequently characterize freebies as manifestations of populism, arguing that such policies undermine fiscal discipline and compromise long-term development objectives. From this perspective, freebies represent short-term electoral incentives that distort voter preferences and weaken mechanisms of democratic accountability⁵. Judicial and policy debates in India have regularly echoed these concerns, framing freebies as instances of irrational or irresponsible governance. These critiques tend to position freebies as deviations from sound economic policy, emphasizing their potential to create fiscal imbalances and perpetuate dependency rather than fostering genuine development.

Recent scholarship has documented how electoral populism, while promoting immediate socio-economic benefits, poses significant challenges to democratic governance, including fiscal stress on state economies, the entrenchment of vote-bank politics, and the erosion of policy-based decision-making processes⁶. Such analysis has highlighted the fine balance required between delivering welfare and maintaining democratic accountability.

2.2 Political Economy Approaches

In contrast, political economy approaches situate freebies within broader welfare regimes and the evolving nature of state-citizen relations⁷. Scholars working within this framework argue that subsidies and welfare schemes reflect historical patterns of redistribution, entrenched social inequalities, and the ongoing negotiation of state legitimacy. Rather than viewing freebies as aberrations or policy mistakes, this perspective understands them as

³Endang, Muh., & Saputra, A. (2024). Fishermen and farmers communities clientelism practices and electoral politics. *Journal of Global Innovations in Agricultural Sciences*, 12(3), 89-104.

⁴Routray, S. (2023). Paper struggles: Documents, inscriptions, and citizenship negotiations in Delhi. *City*, 27(3-4), 412-430.

⁵Shreyansh, & Kurlwal, A. (2025). Electoral freebies and democratic erosion: Centre-state tensions, governance deficits and societal impacts in India. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Knowledge*, 8(2), 198-217

⁶Tripathy, S. (2025). Electoral populism and democratic governance in Indian states: Boon or bane? *ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities*, 15(1), 78-93.

⁷Ugaz, D. C. (2024). Framing welfare expansion: Citizenship, collective memory, and fiscal dilemmas in Mexico and Peru. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 10, 1-15.

integral components of a larger continuum of social policy, particularly significant in societies marked by structural deprivation and limited access to basic services.

Such analyses emphasize how welfare provision connects to questions of citizenship, rights, and the social contract between governments and governed populations. Research has shown that welfare policies serve not merely as redistributive mechanisms but as fundamental expressions of social rights of citizenship, following T.H. Marshall's conceptualization⁸. This body of work demonstrates that welfare entitlements represent claims for public transfers, goods, and services which are not proportionate to the market value of the claimant, thereby embodying broader principles of social justice and equality.

2.3 Empirical Studies of Voter Behavior

A third body of research examines the empirical relationship between welfare benefits and voter behavior. Some quantitative studies suggest that material benefits can influence voting decisions, particularly among economically vulnerable groups who may be more responsive to tangible policy outputs⁹. However, other research urges caution against overly deterministic interpretations, emphasizing that voters weigh multiple considerations simultaneously, including leadership qualities, governance performance, party identification, and identity-based considerations.

Research on clientelism and vote-buying has provided important insights into how political actors use welfare benefits strategically to secure electoral support. Studies examining allocation of benefits under local government programs in India have found patterns consistent with political clientelism, where voters respond positively to private welfare benefits¹⁰. Nevertheless, experimental evidence from various contexts suggests that the relationship between welfare provision and voting behavior is more nuanced than simple vote-buying models suggest. This more complex understanding recognizes that electoral decision-making involves multifaceted reasoning that cannot be reduced to simple material calculations. Research on electoral behavior in India has shown that voters engage with campaign promises and policy performance in sophisticated ways, balancing retrospective evaluations with prospective assessments.

2.4 Research Gaps

Despite these valuable contributions, there remains a notable scarcity of qualitative studies that foreground voter voices and center their lived experiences. Much existing research relies on large-scale surveys or aggregate electoral data, which may successfully capture broad patterns but often fail to illuminate the meanings, interpretations, and reasoning processes underlying those patterns¹¹. This study addresses this methodological and conceptual gap by focusing explicitly on how voters themselves articulate their understanding of freebies, thereby contributing to a more grounded and interpretive account of welfare politics in contemporary India. By privileging voter narratives over elite discourse or statistical patterns, this research seeks to reveal the complex ways in which citizens negotiate questions of welfare, entitlement, and political choice.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

⁸ Stephens, J. (2010). The social rights of citizenship. In F. G. Castles, S. Leibfried, J. Lewis, H. Obinger, & C. Pierson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the welfare state* (pp. 511-525). Oxford University Press.

⁹ Weschle, S (2016). Punishing personal and electoral corruption: Experimental evidence from India. *Research & Politics*, 3(2), 1-6

¹⁰ Bardhan, P., Mitra, S., Mookerjee, D., & Nath, A. (2020). How do voters respond to welfare vis-a-vis public good programs? An empirical test for clientelism. *Journal of Development Economics*, 145, 102471.

¹¹ ABDULWASIU, S., & SHEHU, A. (2026). CAMPAIGN PROMISES AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES: A CASESTUDY OF SOKOTONORTHSENATORIALZONEDURING THE 2023 SOKOTO STATE GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*.

This investigation employs a qualitative research design to examine voter perceptions and narratives related to freebies. A qualitative approach proves particularly appropriate for examining subjective meanings, moral reasoning, and everyday experiences that quantitative methods cannot adequately capture. Rather than seeking to measure the prevalence of particular attitudes or to establish causal relationships, this research aims to understand the interpretive frameworks through which voters make sense of welfare policies and their role in political life.

3.2 Data Collection

We gathered primary data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with voters across different localities in Delhi. An open-ended interview guide was developed to encourage participants to speak freely about their experiences with government benefits, household discussions surrounding political issues, and their perspectives on elections. This flexible format allowed us to maintain thematic consistency across interviews while remaining receptive to unexpected insights and allowing conversations to develop organically.

Interviews were conducted in either Hindi or English, depending on participant preference and comfort. They typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. With informed consent from all participants, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis. The bilingual approach ensured that language barriers did not prevent genuine expression, allowing participants to articulate their views in whichever language felt most natural.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive and maximum variation sampling techniques to capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Participants included adult voters from varied socio-economic backgrounds, different residential settings (ranging from unauthorized colonies to middle-class neighborhoods), and multiple occupational categories. Particular attention was paid to including individuals who had direct experience with government-provided benefits, as well as those who engaged actively in household or community discussions on political matters.

Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved that is, until additional interviews no longer produced new themes or insights relevant to the research questions. In total, 35 interviews were conducted, providing a substantial corpus of narrative data for analysis.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were clearly informed about the study's purpose and assured that their identities would remain anonymous in all publications. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, care was taken to create a comfortable environment for discussion, and no direct references to specific political parties were actively solicited, allowing participants to raise such issues only if they chose to do so.

3.5 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative method appropriate for identifying patterns across textual data. The analysis proceeded through multiple iterative stages, following established frameworks for qualitative data analysis in social science research. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to gain deep familiarity with the data and develop initial impressions. Second, open coding was undertaken to identify recurring ideas, expressions, and conceptual categories emerging from the narratives. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, identifying relationships and patterns across different participants' accounts.

Finally, higher-order themes were developed to capture underlying patterns and meanings that cut across the entire dataset. Throughout the analytical process, reflexive memos were maintained to document analytical decisions, track the evolution of interpretations, and minimize researcher bias. Contradictory cases and dissenting

voices were actively examined rather than dismissed, ensuring that the analysis avoided overgeneralization and remained attentive to the diversity within the data.

4. Findings: Voter Narratives on Freebies in Delhi

The analysis of interview data reveals that voter perceptions of freebies are considerably more complex, layered, and contextually grounded than commonly assumed. Rather than treating freebies as isolated electoral incentives disconnected from broader life circumstances, participants situated them within extensive discussions of livelihood pressures, state responsibility, household decision-making, and long-term governance priorities. Five major themes emerged from the analysis, each revealing distinct dimensions of how voters understand and evaluate welfare provisions.

Theme 1: Freebies as Everyday Support in Urban Life

A predominant theme across interviews involved framing freebies as forms of everyday support that help households navigate rising living costs rather than as transformative interventions. Participants rarely described these benefits as life-changing windfalls or excessive handouts. Instead, they were consistently characterized as modest forms of relief that eased routine financial stress in an expensive urban environment like Delhi. As one voter explained with notable pragmatism, “It’s not like these things make us rich. They just help us manage the month better. When expenses keep increasing, any relief matters.”

This narrative pattern suggests that voters interpret freebies through a pragmatic lens, evaluating them against daily economic realities rather than abstract fiscal debates occurring in policy circles or courtrooms. Freebies are thus embedded in the ordinary rhythms of household budgeting and survival strategies, particularly among lower and middle-income groups who face persistent economic pressures. The emphasis was consistently on incremental relief rather than fundamental transformation, reflecting a grounded understanding of what these policies can and cannot accomplish in practice.

Theme 2: Freebies, Entitlement, and State Responsibility

Another recurring and significant theme was the perception of freebies as legitimate entitlements linked to citizenship rather than as charity or discretionary political favors. Many participants articulated a clear view that the state bears a fundamental responsibility to ensure access to basic services, especially in a context marked by persistent inequality and widespread employment insecurity. This sense of entitlement was frequently accompanied by expectations of accountability, quality of service delivery, and continuity in provision.

Rather than expressing gratitude alone or viewing themselves as passive recipients of benevolence, voters regularly evaluated whether benefits were delivered fairly, efficiently, and equitably across different communities. Such narratives fundamentally challenge the assumption that freebies necessarily produce political dependency or undermine citizen agency. Instead, they highlight a moral framework in which welfare provision is understood as part of the social contract between citizens and the state a reciprocal relationship rather than a one-way transaction. This finding suggests that many voters possess a sophisticated understanding of citizenship that includes material entitlements alongside political rights.

Theme 3: Household Conversations and Collective Evaluation

Interviews revealed that perceptions of freebies were often shaped through household-level discussions rather than through individual reflection alone. Participants frequently described conversations among family members in which benefits were discussed alongside a range of other issues such as children’s education, employment opportunities, healthcare access, and infrastructure quality. These discussions contributed to a collective evaluation of government performance that extended well beyond individual material gain.

Importantly, freebies were rarely considered in isolation during such household conversations. Instead, they were weighed against broader expectations of governance, indicating that electoral reasoning is often negotiated within domestic spaces rather than driven by atomized individual calculations. This collective dimension of political judgment suggests that understanding voter behavior requires attention to social contexts and deliberative

processes that occur beyond the voting booth. Families discuss not just what they receive, but what it means, whether it is fair, and how it fits into their larger assessment of governance.

Theme 4: Freebies and Electoral Decision-Making

While participants readily acknowledged that freebies feature prominently in election campaigns and political rhetoric, most firmly rejected the notion that such benefits alone determine their voting behavior. Voting decisions were consistently described as multi-dimensional, influenced by multiple considerations including leadership credibility, overall governance record, and perceived future direction. One participant captured this widespread sentiment by stating, “Benefits are discussed, of course, but voting is not only about that. We also see how the government works overall, not just what is free.”

This pattern suggests that freebies function more as contextual factors in electoral decision-making rather than as decisive incentives that straightforwardly purchase votes. Voters appeared quite conscious of the distinction between short-term material benefits and long-term governance outcomes, demonstrating a capacity for nuanced political judgment that challenges deterministic models of voter behavior. While welfare provisions matter and are certainly discussed, they constitute one element among many in a complex evaluative process that includes assessments of competence, integrity, and vision.

Theme 5: Critical and Policy-Oriented Perspectives on Freebies

Alongside predominantly supportive narratives, a smaller yet intellectually significant group of participants expressed critical views concerning the heavy emphasis placed on freebies in political discourse. These voters questioned whether the intense focus on free provisions diverted attention and resources from deeper structural issues, such as employment generation, skill development, and institutional strengthening. As one thoughtful participant argued, “Freebies look helpful, but they avoid the main issues. Instead of improving schools or creating jobs, the focus stays on what can be given for free. That doesn’t change people’s situation in the long run.”

Some participants further articulated a policy-oriented critique that distinguished between immediate support and long-term capacity building. While not opposing welfare provision outright, they advocated for a reallocation of resources toward sustainable development goals. This perspective was reflected in observations such as: “Support is necessary, but policy should be about capacity building. If the same money went into education, health, or employment, people would not need so many free schemes later.” These dissenting voices indicate that voter critiques of freebies are not rooted in a rejection of welfare itself, but rather in genuine concerns about policy priorities, resource allocation, and long-term developmental outcomes. Such narratives complicate simplistic portrayals of voters as uncritical recipients of state largesse, revealing instead a constituency capable of engaging with policy trade-offs and thinking about intergenerational consequences.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study substantially complicate dominant narratives that portray freebies primarily as instruments of electoral manipulation or examples of fiscal irresponsibility. By foregrounding voter narratives from Delhi, the analysis demonstrates that freebies are interpreted through the lens of everyday experiences, moral reasoning, and expectations of state responsibility rather than through simple cost-benefit calculations. This section situates these empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on welfare politics and voter behavior, drawing connections to existing scholarship while highlighting the distinctive contributions of this research.

First, the framing of freebies as everyday support underscores the critical importance of contextualizing welfare policies within urban lived realities. In a city characterized by rising costs of living, insecure employment patterns, and uneven access to public services, voters evaluated freebies primarily in relation to immediate household needs and financial pressures¹². This challenges normative critiques that dismiss freebies as irrational or excessive,

¹² Munandar, A. (2020). Social policy in the global transformation flow: State responsibility for social welfare. *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development*, 9(5), 56-72.

suggesting instead that voters perceive them as pragmatic responses to structural vulnerabilities that characterize contemporary urban life. Such interpretations resonate with scholarship that conceptualizes welfare not as merely redistribution but as a mechanism through which the state negotiates legitimacy in profoundly unequal societies.

Second, the perception of freebies as entitlement rather than charity highlights an important moral dimension of voter reasoning that is often overlooked in instrumental accounts of political behavior¹³. Participants' emphasis on government responsibility reflects an understanding of welfare as constitutive of the citizen-state relationship, rather than as a discretionary political favor extended by benevolent leaders. This finding complicates clientelistic interpretations that assume a direct, transactional exchange between material benefits and political loyalty¹⁴. Instead, voters appear to evaluate welfare provision alongside expectations of fairness, continuity, and accountability, embedding freebies within a broader normative framework of rights and reciprocal obligations.

Third, the significant role of household conversations in shaping perceptions of freebies points to the fundamentally collective nature of electoral reasoning. Voting decisions emerge not solely from individual preferences formed in isolation, but from shared discussions within domestic spaces, where welfare benefits are weighed against concerns such as employment opportunities, educational quality, and overall governance performance. This finding aligns with interpretive approaches to political behavior that emphasize social context, deliberation, and the negotiation of meaning. It also suggests that analyses focusing exclusively on individual voter responses may systematically miss important dimensions of political judgment that are inherently social and relational.

Fourth, the findings on electoral decision-making indicate that while freebies are undeniably salient in campaign discourse, they rarely function as decisive factors operating in isolation¹⁵. Voters demonstrated a clear ability to differentiate between short-term material benefits and long-term governance performance, suggesting a more sophisticated political calculus than typically acknowledged. This challenges deterministic models that equate welfare provision with vote-buying and instead supports a more nuanced understanding of electoral behavior, where material benefits form one component of a broader, multifaceted evaluative process that includes assessments of competence, integrity, and vision.

Finally, the presence of critical and policy-oriented dissent among voters further complicates simplistic assumptions about public attitudes toward freebies¹⁶. Rather than uniformly embracing all welfare provisions, dissenting narratives emphasized the need for capacity building, employment generation, and institutional development. Such critiques suggest that voters are genuinely capable of engaging with policy trade-offs and considering long-term consequences. Importantly, these perspectives emerge organically from within voter narratives themselves, rather than being imposed by elite or academic discourses.

In summary, these findings suggest that freebies occupy an ambiguous and contested position in voter consciousness. They are simultaneously valued as immediate support, evaluated as legitimate citizen entitlements, debated within households, and scrutinized for their long-term implications. By centering voter voices, this study demonstrates that welfare politics in Delhi cannot be adequately understood through binary categories such as populism versus prudence or rationality versus irrationality. Instead, voter narratives reveal a complex interpretive process through which citizens actively negotiate the meaning of state support in both everyday life and democratic participation.

¹³ Stephens, J. (2010). The social rights of citizenship. In F. G. Castles, S. Leibfried, J. Lewis, H. Obinger, & C. Pierson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the welfare state* (pp. 511-525). Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Bardhan, P., Mitra, S., Mookherjee, D., & Nath, A. (2020). How do voters respond to welfare vis-a-vis public good programs? An empirical test for clientelism. *Journal of Development Economics*, 145, 102471.

¹⁵ Naganoor, M. (2024). A study on electoral reforms and their effectiveness in enhancing democratic participation in Indian context. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, 5(8), 334-348.

¹⁶ Bansal, S. (2025). Populism or empowerment: Welfare politics in Indian electoral democracy. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 8(1), 234-251.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into voter perceptions of freebies in Delhi, several limitations warrant acknowledgment.

First, the geographic focus on Delhi limits the generalizability of findings to other Indian states with different political cultures, welfare histories, and socio-economic contexts. States such as Tamil Nadu, which has a longer history of welfare provision, or more rural states might exhibit different patterns of voter reasoning.

Second, the qualitative nature of the research, while enabling deep exploration of meanings and interpretations, does not permit statistical generalization or quantification of how widespread particular perspectives might be across the broader voter population. The study captures depth rather than breadth, privileging nuance over representativeness.

Third, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential social desirability bias, where participants might present themselves as more rational or less materially motivated than they actually are in electoral contexts. While the interview approach sought to minimize such bias, it cannot be entirely eliminated.

Fourth, the study does not systematically examine how perceptions vary across specific demographic categories such as gender, age, or occupation, though the sampling strategy ensured diversity. Future research could more explicitly analyze such variations.

Finally, the timing of interviews relative to election cycles may influence how prominently freebies feature in voter discourse. Perceptions might differ substantially during active campaign periods compared to non-election periods.

7. Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for policymakers, political parties, and scholars of Indian democracy. Understanding that voters perceive freebies as legitimate entitlements rather than mere handouts suggests that welfare policies should be designed with attention to principles of rights, dignity, and accountability rather than simply as electoral strategies.

For political parties, the findings indicate that while welfare provisions matter to voters, they do not operate as simple vote-purchasing mechanisms¹⁷. Voters evaluate welfare within broader assessments of governance, suggesting that parties cannot rely on freebies alone but must demonstrate competence across multiple policy domains.

For policymakers, the critical voter perspectives emphasizing capacity building and long-term development suggest the need for balanced approaches that combine immediate support with investments in education, healthcare infrastructure, and employment generation¹⁸. The challenge lies in designing welfare systems that provide necessary relief while also building pathways out of dependency.

Finally, for democratic discourse, these findings suggest the need to move beyond polarized debates that either celebrate or condemn freebies categorically. Instead, nuanced discussions that acknowledge both the legitimacy of welfare provision and the importance of fiscal sustainability and development priorities are needed.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined how voters in Delhi understand and discuss freebies by centering everyday experiences rather than elite or normative debates. Using a qualitative approach, it demonstrates that voter views on freebies

¹⁷ Bardhan, P., Mitra, S., Mookherjee, D., & Nath, A. (2020). How do voters respond to welfare vis-a-vis public good programs? An empirical test for clientelism. *Journal of Development Economics*, 145, 102471.

¹⁸ Tripathy, S. (2025). Electoral populism and democratic governance in Indian states: Boon or bane? *ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities*, 15(1), 78-93.

are varied, contextually grounded, and shaped by daily economic realities, shared family discussions, and expectations from the state. Voters do not treat freebies as isolated election promises but situate them within the broader context of urban living, household economics, and governance evaluation.

The findings indicate that freebies are often perceived as practical support that helps households manage financial pressures in a city marked by rising costs and economic uncertainty. These benefits are generally normalized as routine government action rather than viewed as exceptional or excessive. Simultaneously, many voters describe freebies as rightful claims linked to citizenship, reinforcing the idea that access to basic services represents a state responsibility rather than a political favor.

Household conversations emerge as important spaces where opinions about welfare and voting are collectively formed. Within these discussions, freebies are weighed alongside concerns such as employment opportunities, education quality, healthcare access, and long-term development trajectories. This highlights the fundamentally collective nature of electoral judgment and challenges the assumption that voting decisions are driven by individual material benefits alone.

Although freebies feature prominently in election-related discussions, they rarely act as the sole factor influencing voter choice. Voters demonstrate a clear ability to balance immediate support with broader assessments of governance quality and future prospects. The presence of critical, policy-oriented views further demonstrates that citizens engage thoughtfully with welfare politics, often calling for greater emphasis on employment generation and capacity building.

By centering voter narratives, this study offers a more refined understanding of welfare politics in contemporary India and underscores the value of qualitative research in capturing the everyday meanings that shape democratic participation. It challenges both celebratory and dismissive accounts of freebies, revealing instead a complex terrain where citizens navigate questions of entitlement, responsibility, and political choice with considerable sophistication. Future research might extend this approach to other Indian states, examine variations across demographic groups, or track how perceptions evolve across electoral cycles. What remains clear, however, is that understanding welfare politics requires serious engagement with how voters themselves make sense of these policies in the context of their lived realities.

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